

U.S. Department of Labor

Benefits Review Board
200 Constitution Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20210-0001



BRB No. 20-0216

AMERICO J. GATEWOOD)

Claimant-Petitioner)

v.)

SERVICE EMPLOYEES)
INTERNATIONAL, INCORPORATED)

and)

INSURANCE COMPANY OF THE STATE)
OF PENNSYLVANIA c/o AIG)
GLOBAL CLAIMS)

Employer/Carrier-)
Respondents)

FLUOR FEDERAL GLOBAL PROJECTS,)
INCORPORATED)

and)

INSURANCE COMPANY OF THE STATE)
OF PENNSYLVANIA c/o AIG)
GLOBAL CLAIMS)

Employer/Carrier-)
Respondents)

DATE ISSUED: 02/26/2021

DECISION and ORDER

Appeal of the Decision and Order Denying Benefits of Angela F. Donaldson,
Administrative Law Judge, United States Department of Labor.

Lara D. Merrigan (Merrigan Legal), Sausalito, California, and Gary Pitts (Pitts, Mills & Ratcliff), Houston, Texas, for Claimant.

John R. Walker (Schouest, Bamdas, Soshea & BenMaier, PLLC), Houston, Texas, for Service Employees International, Incorporated and Insurance Company of the State of Pennsylvania, c/o AIG Global Claims.

John F. Karpousis and Matthew J. Pallay (Freehill, Hogan & Mahar LLP), New York, New York, for Fluor Federal Global Projects, Incorporated and Insurance Company of the State of Pennsylvania, c/o AIG Global Claims.

Before: BOGGS, Chief Administrative Appeals Judge, GRESH and JONES, Administrative Appeals Judges.

PER CURIAM:

Claimant appeals Administrative Law Judge Angela F. Donaldson's Decision and Order Denying Benefits (2017-LDA-00977, 00978) rendered on claims filed pursuant to the Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation Act, as amended, 33 U.S.C. §901 *et seq.*, as extended by the Defense Base Act, 42 U.S.C. §1651 *et seq.* (Act). We must affirm the administrative law judge's findings of fact and conclusions of law if they are rational, supported by substantial evidence, and in accordance with applicable law. 33 U.S.C. §921(b)(3); *O'Keeffe v. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc.*, 380 U.S. 359 (1965).

Claimant sought benefits for dermatological and psychological injuries allegedly sustained in the course of his fuel distribution job in Afghanistan and Iraq. His overseas deployment consisted of two stints as a fuel truck operator with Service Employees International, Incorporated (SEII) from January 2004 to July 2007, and January 2008 to November 2009, and one as a fuel truck driver/fuel supervisor with Fluor Federal Global Projects, Incorporated (Fluor) from December 2009 to November 2012. Fluor terminated Claimant for unsatisfactory job performance in mid-November 2012. Claimant returned to the United States and subsequently worked as a package driver in Texas from December 2013 through September 5, 2014, and then as a fuel truck driver in North Dakota from late September 2014 until May 13, 2015. Claimant has not held any gainful employment since that date.

Claimant stated his overseas work regularly exposed him to fuel and the rubber and plastic components of his on-the-job personal protective equipment, and that his hands would itch and sweat. However, he denied having any skin blistering or eruptions and never reported or sought treatment for any skin problems while overseas. Claimant also described his general overseas work environment as involving constant incoming mortar

rounds, sniper fire, and suicide bombing attempts, though he stated he never personally witnessed anyone injured or killed, nor encountered any specific damage when it occurred. He further denied experiencing any “stress issues” during his time overseas.

Claimant first experienced a skin eruption on his arms, hands, legs and stomach in late summer 2013. He initially was treated by Dr. Kenneth Dorsey, who diagnosed “allergic contact dermatitis,” prescribed a topical steroid and antihistamine, and issued return to work notes, with no restrictions, dated April 11 and May 23, 2014. He then was treated by Dr. Sylvia Hsu from May 27, 2014 to well into 2016, who diagnosed Claimant with “a severe case of eczema which affects his entire body.” CX 1. Claimant began treatment with Dr. Arturo Dominguez in May 2016, who diagnosed chronic eczematous dermatitis and opined, with a “high likelihood,” that Claimant’s overseas work exposures contributed to his “persistent post-occupational dermatitis.” CX 1 at 49. Dr. Steven L. Hubert, on February 27, 2019, opined “to a high degree of medical probability” that the allergy sensitization responsible for Claimant’s chronic skin eruption “occurred during his domestic employment and not while in Afghanistan.” Fluor Ex. D.

Claimant first sought mental health treatment in December 2015 with Rick Parrott, Ph.D., LCSW, CFSW, who gave a preliminary diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and referred Claimant to a psychiatrist, Dr. Penelope Hook. Dr. Hook diagnosed PTSD secondary to living and working in a war zone for nine years, and alcohol abuse, secondary to PTSD. In 2016, Claimant began treatment with Care Choices of Leesville, Louisiana, where he was diagnosed with PTSD and moderate, recurrent major depressive disorder, prescribed medications and provided regular therapy counseling. In a letter dated December 20, 2016, Tiffany Smith, LCSW-BACS, of Care Choices opined that the cause of Claimant’s PTSD is his exposures to “actual threatened death” and “serious injury” while working overseas for SEII and Fluor. CX 1 at 42-43. On March 17, 2018, John Tsanadis, Ph.D., ABPP, diagnosed unspecified anxiety and depressive disorders, and moderate alcohol use disorder. CX 7. He opined that while “experiences” related to Claimant’s overseas work, which he identified as Claimant’s termination and the adjustment difficulties he encountered after returning to the United States, may have contributed to his current symptoms, “it’s more likely than not that the [Claimant’s] actual work experience did not contribute” to Claimant’s psychological condition. *Id.* at 15; HT at 197.

Claimant filed claims against both of his employers, Fluor and SEII, for his skin and psychological injuries, which they controverted. EX 2-3. The administrative law judge found Claimant gave Fluor and SEII (Employers) timely notice of his injuries and filed timely claims for benefits. 33 U.S.C. §§912, 913; Decision and Order at 40-42. She found Claimant entitled to the Section 20(a) presumption, 33 U.S.C. §920(a), that his skin disease and psychological conditions are related to his overseas work with SEII and Fluor, but that

Employers established rebuttal thereof. She then determined Claimant did not show on the record as a whole that his dermatological and/or psychological injuries are related to his overseas work. Accordingly, she denied Claimant's claims.

On appeal, Claimant challenges the administrative law judge's findings that Employers rebutted the Section 20(a) presumption with regard to his dermatological and psychological conditions. Alternatively, he challenges the administrative law judge's finding that he did not establish his psychological injuries are work-related based on the record as a whole. Fluor and SEII separately respond, urging affirmance of the administrative law judge's denial of Claimant's claims. Claimant filed a reply brief.

Section 20(a) Rebuttal

Where, as here, the Section 20(a) presumption applies to link Claimant's harm with his employment, the burden shifts to Employers to rebut it by producing substantial evidence that the injuries were not caused or aggravated by Claimant's working conditions. *Ceres Gulf, Inc. v. Director, OWCP [Plaisance]*, 683 F.3d 225, 46 BRBS 25(CRT) (5th Cir. 2012); *Conoco, Inc. v. Director, OWCP*, 194 F.3d 684, 33 BRBS 187(CRT) (5th Cir. 1999). Substantial evidence is defined as "that relevant evidence—more than a scintilla but less than a preponderance—that would cause a reasonable person to accept the fact-finding." *Plaisance*, 683 F.3d at 228, 46 BRBS at 27(CRT). An employer's burden on rebuttal is one of production, not persuasion; thus, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, within whose jurisdiction this case arises, held that to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption, the employer satisfies its burden by offering substantial evidence that "throws factual doubt" on the claimant's prima facie case. *Id.*, 683 F.3d at 231, 46 BRBS at 29(CRT).

Allergic Contact Dermatitis

Claimant contends Dr. Hubert's opinion, acknowledging that years of chemical exposure can precede a patient's developing Claimant's condition but ultimately concluding he does not know what caused his skin condition, is not substantial evidence to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption. Claimant maintains Dr. Hubert's opinion does not address his years of cumulative overseas work exposures building up to a point of sensitization, is inconsistent regarding when his rash began, is based on an incorrect assumption that he was working with chemicals domestically when his rash began, and is too speculative in stating the underlying cause of his contact dermatitis.

Dr. Hubert stated in his report and at his deposition that the cause of Claimant's allergic contact dermatitis is not his overseas employment, but instead "his stateside exposure." Fluor Ex. D; Fluor Ex. JJ, Dep. at 15, 18, 31-32, 41. He explained that with

Claimant's particular diagnosis, he would have expected some sort of a reaction or skin eruption to occur within seven to ten days of exposure to the injurious element(s). *Id.* In short, Dr. Hubert opined, "[t]he logical conclusion is [Claimant] developed the allergy a couple of weeks before the rash commenced." Fluor Ex. JJ, Dep. at 20. While, as Claimant states, Dr. Hubert was not able to identify the specific exposure that caused his skin condition, that does not preclude considering Dr. Hubert's opinion as rebuttal evidence, because an employer is not required to establish another agency of causation in order to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption; the employer need only produce substantial evidence that the work did not cause the injury. *O'Kelley v. Dep't of the Army/NAF*, 34 BRBS 39 (2000). In this case, the administrative law judge found Dr. Hubert's opinion, stated with a "high degree of medical certainty," that Claimant's skin disease was the result of an allergy sensitization that did not occur during, or because of, his overseas employment, constitutes substantial evidence to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption.¹ Decision and Order at 45; Fluor Ex. JJ, Dep. at 15. We therefore affirm the administrative law judge's finding that Employers rebutted the Section 20(a) presumption with regard to Claimant's claim of a dermatological injury. *See generally Jones v. Aluminum Co. of America*, 35 BRBS 37, 40 (2001); *O'Kelley*, 34 BRBS at 41-42. We also affirm, as unchallenged on appeal, the administrative law judge's finding that Claimant "has not established by preponderant evidence that his skin disease was caused by his overseas employment with SEII or Fluor."² Decision and Order at 46; *Scalio v. Ceres Marine Terminals, Inc.*, 41 BRBS 57 (2007). Thus, we affirm the denial of benefits for this condition.

¹Contrary to Claimant's contentions, Dr. Hubert's report reflects Claimant's statements regarding his symptomology. Fluor Ex. D; Fluor Ex. JJ, Dep. at 8, 11, 14, 36-38, 41.

²Nevertheless, the administrative law judge also rationally concluded Claimant did not establish on the record as whole that his dermatological injury is work-related. She accorded greatest weight to the opinion of Dr. Hubert that Claimant's dermatological condition was not caused by his overseas work because it is better explained and "is based on a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the timeline of the development of Claimant's skin condition and Claimant's activities during that timeline." Decision and Order at 35, 46. In contrast, she accorded less weight to Dr. Dominquez's opinion, tying Claimant's skin condition to his overseas employment, because it is based on the "flawed" factual premise that Claimant developed recurrent hand dermatitis while overseas, which does not accurately reflect Claimant's history of symptoms and is otherwise unsupported by the record. *Id.* at 37-38, 47. The administrative law judge's findings in this regard are affirmed as they are supported by substantial evidence. *Bourgeois v. Director, OWCP*, 946 F.3d 263, 53 BRBS 91(CRT) (5th Cir. 2020).

Psychological Conditions

Claimant contends Dr. Tsanadis's opinion is insufficient to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption that his psychological conditions are work-related because he opined Claimant's adjustment difficulties, upon returning home after almost ten years of working in an overseas war zone, was a significant contributor to those conditions. Claimant further contends that even if Dr. Tsanadis's opinion constitutes substantial evidence to rebut the presumption with regard to Claimant's employment for Fluor, his acknowledgment that stressful events during Claimant's work with SEII contributed to his mental condition is insufficient to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption with respect to SEII.

In his report dated April 8, 2019, Dr. Tsanadis answered "yes" when questioned as to whether Claimant suffers "from a mental illness," which he identified as "unspecified depressive disorder, unspecified anxiety disorder, and alcohol use disorder." CX 7 at 14. Addressing causation, Dr. Tsanadis stated the "[e]vidence is equivocal with respect to the [C]laimant's mental condition being caused or aggravated by his employment with Fluor" as it "is not compelling that his mental condition was caused exclusively by his employment; however, there is some evidence that experiences he had while working for Fluor may have contributed to his current difficulties." *Id.* at 15. These experiences, he stated, primarily involved Claimant's termination from his overseas employment and "difficulty readjusting" once back in the United States, though Dr. Tsanadis also acknowledged Claimant reported "intrusive thoughts related to experiences he had while working," i.e., exposure to trauma which likely occurred between 2005 and 2009, "well before he stopped working involuntarily" due to his termination. *Id.* He further stated, "[c]ertainly, non-work-related factors also contributed to difficulties including the already mentioned alcohol use, losing his job, and difficulties with his relationship with his wife after returning." *Id.*

At the hearing, Dr. Tsanadis reiterated his diagnoses of "unspecified depressive disorder," "unspecified anxiety disorder" and "alcohol use disorder moderate", HT at 177, but added Claimant does not have PTSD. HT at 155, 176. In terms of causation, Dr. Tsanadis stated "I don't find any evidence that his exposure to work life over[seas] caused his anxiety or depression." *Id.* at 180. He added it is "quite possible" Claimant's termination could have caused these conditions. *Id.* Asked whether Claimant's conditions were not caused by his termination but from his actual work overseas, Dr. Tsanadis responded "I don't have any consistent or reliable evidence to say that it was." *Id.* at 195. Asked again to clarify what "experiences" while Claimant worked with Fluor may have contributed to his current disabilities, Dr. Tsanadis stated he "meant his, first of all, being away from home for an extended period of time and also being fired," *id.* at 196, but that "it's more likely than not that the actual work experience did not contribute." *Id.* at 197.

Contrary to Claimant's contention, the administrative law judge validly assessed Dr. Tsanadis's opinion in its entirety and reasonably concluded Dr. Tsanadis identified Claimant's "readjustment" difficulties as due to his abrupt termination, rather than any "working conditions" of his overseas work. She permissibly found his statements that "I don't have any consistent or reliable evidence to say" Claimant's psychological conditions were caused by his overseas work, "I don't find any evidence that his exposure to work life over[seas] caused his anxiety or depression," and that "it's more likely than not that the actual work experience did not contribute" to Claimant's psychological conditions constitute substantial evidence sufficient to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption. Moreover, Dr. Tsanadis's opinion that Claimant does not have PTSD constitutes substantial evidence to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption that Claimant's PTSD-like symptoms are work-related. As the administrative law judge was entitled to find this evidence throws "factual doubt" on Claimant's prima facie case, we affirm her finding that Dr. Tsanadis's "well-reasoned" opinion is "legally sufficient to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption."³ Decision and Order at 46; *Sea-Land Services, Inc., v. Director, OWCP [Ceasar]*, 949 F.3d 921, 54 BRBS 9(CRT) (5th Cir. 2020); *Bourgeois v. Director, OWCP*, 946 F.3d 263, 53 BRBS 91(CRT) (5th Cir. 2020); *Plaisance*, 683 F.3d at 228, 46 BRBS at 27(CRT).

Causation – Weighing of the Evidence as a Whole

Claimant contends the underlying premise the administrative law judge relied on to find his psychological condition unrelated to his overseas work is not in accordance with law or representative of the facts in this case. He asserts the administrative law judge too narrowly applied the doctrine espoused in *Marino v. Navy Exchange*, 20 BRBS 166 (1988), and *Sewell v. Noncommissioned Officers' Open Mess, McChord Air Force Base*, 32 BRBS 127 (1997) (McGranery, J., dissenting), *aff'd on recon. en banc*, 32 BRBS 134 (1998) (Brown and McGranery, JJ., dissenting), to find his dismissal for cause from Fluor precludes his entitlement to benefits. He avers that Dr. Tsanadis's opinion that Claimant's psychiatric condition is caused by his difficulty readjusting to life in the United States after nearly a decade of working and living in a war zone is sufficient to establish the causal connection between his condition and his overseas work for Fluor and SEII. Claimant maintains that denying benefits for reintegration because his return to the United States

³Additionally, Dr. Tsanadis's opinion that "experiences [Claimant] had likely related to the trauma exposure" while overseas did not cause his present psychological conditions, HT at 185, is sufficient to rebut the Section 20(a) presumption as to his employment with SEII. Thus, although Dr. Tsanadis noted certain stressful events which Claimant alleged he encountered during his work with SEII, CX 7 at 2, he opined that those "trauma exposure[s]" did not contribute to Claimant's psychological injuries.

was triggered by his for-cause termination either: (1) amounts to an impermissible fault analysis; or (2) results in the irrational proposition that reintegration stress is never compensable because all employment ends with a personnel action, even if that action is the ordinary end of a contract.

Once the Section 20(a) presumption is rebutted, the claimant bears the burden of establishing that his condition is work-related based upon a weighing of the evidence in the record as a whole. *Bis Salamis, Inc. v. Director, OWCP [Meeks]*, 819 F.3d 116, 127, 50 BRBS 29, 35-36(CRT) (5th Cir. 2016); *Suarez v. Service Employees Int’l Inc.*, 50 BRBS 33, 36 (2016). A psychological injury resulting from a “legitimate personnel action” is not compensable under the Act, as such an event is not a “working condition” which can form the basis for a compensable injury. *Pedroza v. Benefits Review Board*, 624 F.3d 926, 44 BRBS 67(CRT) (9th Cir. 2010); *Raiford v. Huntington Ingalls Indus., Inc.*, 49 BRBS 61 (2015); *Sewell*, 32 BRBS 127; *Marino*, 20 BRBS 166.

In *Marino*, the Board held “if claimant’s psychological condition arose wholly from his termination, the condition is not compensable.” *Marino*, 20 BRBS at 168. In *Sewell*, the Board, following *Marino*, held that, irrespective of disciplinary actions, stressful general working conditions, if alleged and established by the claimant, can satisfy the “working conditions” element of a prima facie case. *Sewell*, 32 BRBS at 135-136.

In *Pedroza*, 624 F.3d 926, 44 BRBS 67(CRT), the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit held that “psychological injuries arising from legitimate personnel decisions are not compensable under the Act” and affirmed the Board’s reasoning in *Sewell* and *Marino*. *Id.*, 624 F.3d at 931-932, 44 BRBS at 70(CRT). The court stated “[a]n interpretation contrary to this would create a trap for the ‘unwary’ employer and [would] undermine the interest of employers and employees alike.” *Id.*, 624 F.3d at 931, 44 BRBS at 70(CRT). As both the Act and the *Marino-Sewell* doctrine establish a balance between the needs of employers and the needs of employees, the court concluded the claimant’s psychological problems were not compensable because they were solely the result of legitimate personnel actions. *Id.* The court specifically held the doctrine does not run afoul of the no-fault scheme of Section 4(b), 33 U.S.C. §904(b). *Id.*, 624 F.3d at 933, 44 BRBS at 72(CRT).

In this case, Claimant concedes his termination by Fluor was “a legitimate personnel decision,” Cl. Br. at 15, but nevertheless alleges his psychological condition is compensable because it is caused by his difficulty readjusting to life back in the United States post-termination. He maintains his readjustment issues are a consequence of his having worked and lived overseas for approximately ten years due to his employment, and that his termination, justified or not, merely expedited the psychological injury he would have eventually sustained at the conclusion of his overseas work and permanent return to

the United States. In essence, the crux of Claimant's contention is that the administrative law judge erroneously found Claimant's "returning home after being away for many years" is "not a condition of working that would give rise to a compensable injury or disease." Decision and Order at 51.

In terms of Claimant's alleged PTSD, the administrative law judge credited Dr. Tsanadis's opinion that Claimant does not have PTSD over the contrary opinions that Claimant's "treating sources" (Drs. Parrott and Hooks, and the staff at Caring Choices) proffered due to Dr. Tsanadis's superior credentials and because she found his opinion better explained and documented.⁴ *Meeks*, 819 F.3d at 126, 50 BRBS at 37(CRT). In terms of Claimant's depression or "other conditions," the administrative law judge found the opinions of Drs. Parrott and Hooks, as well as the letter from Caring Choices, insufficient to meet Claimant's burden because these providers did not identify any condition other than PTSD related to Claimant's overseas work. Decision and Order at 52. She also found, having drawn a rational inference from the entirety of Dr. Tsanadis's report and testimony, that any possible causal connection between Claimant's psychological injury and his overseas work is dubious at best. In making this finding, the administrative law judge relied on the undisputed facts that Claimant had no symptoms contemporaneous with the alleged events – something Dr. Tsanadis stated would be expected if the overseas traumas were causative⁵ – and Claimant repeatedly denied having any psychological issues and/or treatment until almost three years after he returned to the United States. *Id.* She further noted Claimant was gainfully employed in the United States from December 2013 through May 13, 2015. Decision and Order at 15, 50, 52.

It is well-established that an administrative law judge, as the fact-finder, has the authority to weigh the evidence and is not required to accept the opinion of any particular medical examiner. *See Meeks*, 819 F.3d at 127, 50 BRBS at 35-36(CRT); *see also Mendoza v. Marine Personnel Co., Inc.*, 46 F.3d 498, 500-501, 29 BRBS 79, 80-81(CRT)

⁴The administrative law judge found Dr. Tsanadis has specialized experience assessing PTSD, whereas the record contains no indication that any of Claimant's "treating sources" have similar or comparable expertise specific to the diagnostic assessments of PTSD. Decision and Order at 15, 32, 51.

⁵In this regard, Dr. Tsanadis stated, "I don't find the temporal relationship between traumas and onset of symptoms." HT at 176. "There are big gaps in between when he stopped working and returned home. Continued working after exposure to trauma with no reported problems in occupational or social functioning and current symptoms are not reliable and the overarching problem at this point in time appears to be alcohol-related problems." *Id.*

(5th Cir. 1995) (“The ALJ determines the weight to be accorded to evidence and makes credibility determinations. Moreover, where the testimony of medical experts is at issue, the ALJ is entitled to accept any part of an expert’s testimony or reject it completely.”) (internal citations omitted). The Board may not reweigh the evidence or draw its own inferences, but may assess only whether there is substantial evidence to support the administrative law judge’s decision. *Ortco Contractors, Inc. v. Charpentier*, 332 F.3d 283, 37 BRBS 35(CRT) (5th Cir.), *cert. denied*, 540 U.S. 1056 (2003).

There is no dispute Claimant’s termination was a “legitimate personnel action.”⁶ Dr. Tsanadis’s opinion constitutes substantial evidence that Claimant does not have any psychological condition related to his overseas work with SEII and Fluor, other than that resulting from his termination.⁷ *Charpentier*, 332 F.3d 283, 37 BRBS 35(CRT); *Lennon v. Waterfront Transport*, 20 F.3d 658, 28 BRBS 22(CRT) (5th Cir. 1994); *Raiford*, 49 BRBS 61. Thus, we affirm the administrative law judge’s conclusion that Claimant’s psychological condition is not compensable.

⁶The administrative law judge’s statement that Claimant’s return from overseas after many years away and difficulty readjusting to life stateside is “not a condition of working that would give rise to a compensable injury or disease,” Decision and Order at 51, is confined to the facts of this case. As such, it is not, as Claimant suggests, a conclusion that reintegration stress is never compensable under the Act. *See generally Dill v. Serv. Employees Int’l, Inc.*, 48 BRBS 31 (2014), *aff’d sub nom. Serv. Employees Int’l, Inc. v. Director, OWCP*, 793 F. App’x 655 (9th Cir. 2020).

⁷Moreover, the administrative law judge found that any psychological conditions attributable to Claimant’s skin disease “are not compensable subsequent injuries because Claimant does not have a covered dermatological injury.” Decision and Order at 53. As we have affirmed the finding that Claimant’s skin condition is not compensable, Claimant’s contention that his psychiatric and skin conditions are intertwined such that if either one is covered, so is the other, is therefore without merit.

Accordingly, we affirm the administrative law judge's Decision and Order Denying Benefits.

SO ORDERED.

JUDITH S. BOGGS, Chief
Administrative Appeals Judge

DANIEL T. GRESH
Administrative Appeals Judge

MELISSA LIN JONES
Administrative Appeals Judge